

## MOSLEM GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS IN NIGERIA

### Religion

The greater number of pure Negro inhabitants of Nigeria are pagans, while among the Negroid and Berber tribes of the North the majority are Mohammedans. Christianity has made slow progress in the country, except in the comparatively few localities where missionaries have worked for long periods.

In considering the pagan beliefs of the people it is important to realize that the existence of a Supreme Being is appreciated practically throughout the country, even by the most backward tribes. This Supreme Being, however, is invisible and remote, and unlikely to interfere much in the petty concerns of the individual. Therefore, although He is not forgotten, more attention is paid to minor deities, good and evil, who are considered to have a greater interest in human affairs. But even these are held to be spirits, and the images which the people venerate are but the representations of the spirits and not the gods themselves. In most cases there is a tribal god, a lesser god for each village of the tribe, a household god for every family in the village, and a personal god for every member of the family. Add to these a god or devil for every striking object of nature, for every river or stream, for every hill or grove, and for every large or remarkable tree, and it will be understood how complicated is the Africans' mythology.

Although the change is slow, paganism is gradually yielding in Nigeria to the influence of Islam and Christianity, partly because of the influence of the social and political advantages of these religions. It is estimated that in Negro Africa, where Christian and Moslem missionaries are in competition, 10 heathens embrace the doctrine of Islam for every one who becomes a Christian. For this there are many reasons. To begin with, to the heathen Islam presents a united front, while sectarian differences tend to weaken the Christian force and puzzle the pagan mind. Again, the doctrines of Mohammed are spread by Africans who can penetrate freely into any part of the country and get in touch with the people, while Christianity is generally preached by European missionaries who do not have this advantage.

The chief reason for the greater success of Islam is because it is better adapted than Christianity to the African life. The native of Nigeria, as he advances in knowledge and becomes more civilized, ceases to believe in the numberless gods of his pagan ancestors and looks around for something better. There is offered to him the choice of the Cross or the Crescent. Both involve strange doctrines which he scarcely understands, but while one forbids him to possess more than one wife, the other imposes no such restriction. Polygamy is an old established custom throughout Nigeria, and to the African it appears not only a reasonable but almost an essential institution. The number of a man's wives provides an indication of

his wealth, in which form it is often entirely invested, and the labor of his wives adds to his income and permits further investments. Children are not a financial burden in West Africa, but add to the wealth of the father, so there is no economic disadvantage in large families. Daughters are easily marketable as wives at an early age, and sons provide an unpaid labor supply. But apart from the financial advantages of a plurality of wives, there is the fact that mothers in most parts of Nigeria nurse their children until they are from two to three years of age, and deny themselves to their husbands during this period. With monogamy the rule, such a custom might in time disappear, but it appears at present to be an insuperable difficulty.

Mohammedanism has existed in northern Nigeria for many centuries, and was certainly introduced before the year 1400. It was adopted by the town-living Fulani some time after their arrival in Hausaland, and under the inspired leadership of Othman dan Fodio, with the cooperation of their fanatical neighbors, they were able early in the nineteenth century to overthrow the pagan state of Gobis and to subdue those Mohammedan cities which failed to conform strictly to the rules of the Prophet. Using their religious zeal as a cloak for their ambition, the Fulani leaders waged endless war against the pagan tribes. "God has given me all the land of the infidels," said Sultan Bello in 1824, and with this comforting knowledge he acquired as much of the infidels' territories as he could.

Bello fought not only against the infidel. Bornu had been a Mohammedan state for centuries when it was invaded by the Fulani, and even when the "Servant of God" Mohammed El Kanemi, a man of unquestioned sanctity and austerity, had driven the invaders from Bornu and abolished the abuses of the past, wars between the Fulani and the Bornu were always breaking out.

With the establishment of the British administration, the spread of Islam by force of arms was stopped, but it has not ceased to spread by more peaceful means. Today more than half the inhabitants of Lagos are Moslems, and elsewhere the religion is gaining rapidly. The statement has been made in the past that the Nigerian Government prevented Christian missions from operating in the Mohammedan Emirates, and that Christian missionaries had been excluded from pagan areas to which the preachers of Islam had been admitted. This charge was met by the promise the British administration gave to the people that when British rule was extended to the north the Mohammedan religion would not be interfered with and all men would be free to worship God as they chose.